

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Bus Driver in Sevier County May Face Charges (KARK, Channel 4)

SEVIER COUNTY, AR - The case of a Lockesburg school bus driver, who was suspended after shutting the doors on a student, is now in the hands of the prosecuting attorney.

On Wednesday afternoon the driver allegedly started driving away after a first grader got stuck in the bus doors.

Sevier County authorities say the student suffered minor bruising.

Students send iPhone into Space (KARK, Channel 4)

ENGLAND, AR_ Elementary school kids in England got a glimpse of space through the lens of an iPhone.

The class put the phone inside a balloon and sent it in the air more than 50,000 feet.

A few hours later, the phone landed in Marvel, Arkansas.
And, get this, it still works.

The class tracked the phone using the Where's My iPhone app.

Editorial: School-Based Health Clinics Provide Care For The Underserved (Southwest Times Record, Fort Smith)

Schoolchildren and three communities in western Arkansas received a double dose of good news this week, in the form of school-based wellness centers.

On Monday, Mansfield officials started construction on a full-time wellness clinic there, one that will provide health care, mental health care, dental care and vision care in a building at the elementary school.

Attending the kickoff was Arkansas Lt. Gov. Mark Darr, a Mansfield native and graduate of Mansfield High. "I know when I grew up here, like a lot of rural Arkansas, we were poor people but we didn't know we were poor. No one went to the doctor or to a dentist, not because that wasn't a priority but because we didn't have the money," Darr said.

Then Cedarville and Waldron school officials learned their respective districts are among seven more Arkansas public school districts to receive grants to establish such centers. Each district will receive \$150,000 during the first year of the five-year grant, and the award amounts will decrease each year thereafter, according to the Arkansas Department of Education. The funds will help the schools implement a center in the 2013-14 academic year.

Waldron interim Superintendent Barbara Wood said school officials there want a school-based clinic for several reasons, including a physician shortage in Scott County and easier access to health care for students.

The grants require that students will be seen regardless of ability to pay. “We will not turn any children away,” said Cedarville Superintendent Dan Foreman.

The centers are a component of the Arkansas Coordinated School Health Program, whose vision statement is “the children and adolescents of Arkansas will become healthy, successful students and contributing members in their communities.” The program promotes health education, physical education, health services, nutritional services, counseling services, healthy school environments, healthy school staff and the involvement of parents and communities.

Some facts in particular strike us about these wellness centers:

- Children will receive care regardless of their family’s financial situation, providing a key advantage to underprivileged children.
- Mansfield, Cedarville and Waldron are all partnering with health-care provider Mercy Clinic, and we salute Mercy for being a corporate partner in the communities it is located.
- These three centers will join three others in western Arkansas enjoying success with their respective wellness centers. The Lavaca School District opened a center in January 2011; Paris School District opened one in September 2011, and Magazine schools opened one in December 2011.

We agree with Mansfield Superintendent Robert Ross, who called the clinic a “win-win for our students as a whole, our faculty, our parents and our community.” What a great step forward in improving the health and lives of our children, our communities and our state.

Questions linger over new school choice law (Pine Bluff Commercial)

LITTLE ROCK — Many questions surround a new state school choice law that removes race as a factor in student transfers but exempts school districts that are under desegregation orders, including whether the measure is being implemented properly.

Act 1227, adopted by the Legislature this year, replaces the 1989 Public School Choice Act that a federal district judge in Little Rock struck down last year. The law contained a race restriction on

student transfers, which the judge said violated the 14th Amendment guarantee of equal protection under the law. The decision was appealed to 8th Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis.

During the recent legislative session, lawmakers decided not to wait for a ruling on the appeal and instead passed Act 1227, which Gov. Mike Beebe signed into law April 16.

Jeremy Lasiter, an attorney for the Education Department, said the agency gets “probably about 10 new questions a day” about the new law.

“We’re still trying to work through all these questions here,” Lasiter said.

The state Department of Education has given school districts until Friday to inform the state whether they will implement an opt-out provision of the law during the 2013-2014 school year. The annual opt-out date in the law is listed as April 1, more than two weeks before Beebe signed it. At the end of last week, seven districts — Blytheville, Camden-Fairview, Cutter Morning Star, El Dorado, Hope, Junction City and Lake Hamilton — had notified the state they won’t participate in the school choice program during the next school year. All claim exemptions by being under an active desegregation order or under federal jurisdiction because of past segregation.

One problem, Lasiter said, is that no one is exactly sure how many school districts are under such orders. At a hearing on a school choice bill that failed during the 2011 legislative session, testimony suggested the number could be as high as 48 districts.

“For several years now, at least the last three of four, we’ve been asking, just requesting school districts to send in notice to us about whether they are under a school desegregation order because that applies to a lot of different laws because of school choice. We’ve gotten some, but we know we have not gotten them all,” Lasiter said last week.

Along with removing the racial component from a school choice law, Act 1227 also caps the number of transfers to no more than 3 percent of the student population. It bars transfers that would conflict with existing desegregation orders.

It requires annual reports to the House and Senate education committees so lawmakers can monitor student transfers to make sure re-segregation does not occur in some districts.

The new law is set to expire July 1, 2015, to allow lawmakers to review the legislation in light of the 8th Circuit’s eventual ruling.

Lasiter said education officials have struggled with how to calculate the 3 percent cap on student transfers. The percentage is based on a district’s student enrollment the previous school year.

The restriction is a net cap, he said, “so it takes into account students that you gain and students that you lose.”

The law allows the siblings of students who seek transfers to leave their resident school district as well, if they choose.

"That indicates maybe siblings are counted a little bit differently. We're trying to get our arms around what exactly that means," Lasiter said. "What this is really going to require is some coordination between school districts and their surrounding schools."

"One day you might be at your cap and you might gain two students that afternoon, and so the next day you can take two more. So, because it's going to be a moving target, it's going to require some close coordination among school districts."

Chris Heller, attorney for the Little Rock School District who spoke against the school choice bill when it was debated in the Senate and House education committees, questioned whether the department can set a Friday deadline for district to say whether they will opt out because that deadline for this year had already passed when the bill was signed.

The law specifies that school districts must announce plans to opt out of the law by April 1 each year, he said.

"So obviously no district declared an exemption in the time required by the statute, but the state Department of Education has established a new deadline," said Heller.

He said he would expect that "some students who want to transfer into a district which is declaring an exemption this week would raise the issue of whether their transfer can really be prevented by that declaration at this time."

Jess Askew, attorney for the Malvern School District, a party in the school choice case before the 8th Circuit, said last week it should not be difficult to implement the law, which he supports.

"I think the law is very clear," Askew said. "Those districts who are under continuing obligations related to student assignment are exempt, whereas a district that believes that school choice is inconsistent with some other kind of federal order has to make some kind of decision by April 1, and they can't do that until April 1, 2014. Any other reading of the law is contrary to the plain language of the law."

Lasiter said the May 17 date "is not a new deadline."

"If you look at how the act is set out, you couldn't really administer this thing in any kind of orderly fashion unless districts actually publicized whether they were going to be under an order that would prevent them from participating," he said.

The department has been receiving calls from school districts inquiring whether another district would be participating or opting out of the new law, he said.

Lasiter said that when school districts call, they are told, "... if you've got a desegregation order that would cause you to be exempt, please let us know, let your surrounding district know, just for the purposes of notification, so the people know where they stand," adding that going forward, districts will have until April 1 to declare.

To protect students who have transferred to other districts since last year's federal court ruling, the Legislature passed House Bill 1294, which became Act 1334 of 2013. Under that law, a student approved for transfer to a non-resident district under a provision of law that is later struck down or repealed are allowed to finish school in the new district, and any present or future sibling could transfer to the district as well.

Last week, , the 8th U.S. Circuit asked attorneys in the school choice case to file briefs by May 22 on how Act 1227 affects the appeal of the 2012 ruling. Askew said the request was not unusual.

"From my reading of that order, the 8th Circuit is concerned about whether the new statute moots any issue in the appeal from the old statute," Askew. "I don't think that courts live in an ivory tower vacuum. I think they are fairly well situated to know a new law has been adopted and for lawyers and judges it makes all the sense in the world to ask what effect the new law may have on the current lawsuit."

Study: State pre-K cuts privilege gap (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

Arkansas' state-funded pre-kindergarten program is narrowing the achievement gap between children from affluent families and children from poor families - not only as the children move through kindergarten - but also into the early elementary grades, according to two studies the Arkansas Department of Human Services released Friday.

"The good news is that, in literacy, in math and verbal-acquisition skills, children are continuing to show gains when they have attended a high quality pre-K program like Arkansas Better Chance," Tonya Russell, director of the agency's Childcare and Early Childhood Education Division, said at a Friday news conference.

The Arkansas Better Chance program sets education standards and provides funding for pre-kindergarten classes that serve about 25,000 children, mostly 4-year-olds, from low-income families. The programs are mostly housed in public schools and in privately owned centers across the state. About \$111 million in state and federal money is spent annually on the program.

Russell, speaking in an activity-filled pre-kindergarten class at North Little Rock's Amboy Elementary School, welcomed the results of the studies as an indication of taxpayer money well spent.

"It allows the state to really stand solid on the investment that we have made," Russell said, noting that Arkansas lawmakers have resisted making reductions to the program.

"At a time when other states have made cuts, Arkansas has remained committed," she said.

The National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University researched the long-term effects of the Arkansas Better Chance program as participating children moved from first through fourth grades.

“Positive effects were found at the end of first and second grade for language, math, and literacy, and at the end of third grade for literacy,” according to the study of children through the 2009-10 school year.

The study, which used comparative statistics to assess the benefits of program participation, described positive results as “modest” but “meaningful.”

“These effects are more pronounced when including only children who did not attend another preschool program in the comparison group than when additionally including children who attended a pre-school program other than the ABC initiative,” the study summarized. That suggested that other preschool programs also produced achievement gains but that those gains were not as large as the state’s program.

The Rutgers study also suggested that the drop-off in achievement differences after third grade between pupils who attended the state pre-kindergarten program and those who did not attend was because of an early-elementary-grades emphasis on raising the achievement levels of low-performing pupils. That would disproportionately help children who did not attend the state program, the study said.

“While effective, these efforts are expensive and may include extra teacher time in the classroom, remedial programs and even special education,” the study said. “These efforts may gradually reduce the test score advantages for the ABC children in later years, but at a substantial cost.”

The study also found that the former Arkansas Better Chance pupils were less likely to repeat a grade by the end of the third grade than those who did not attend a pre-kindergarten program.

The Rutgers study was funded by the state and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

A second study done by the Arkansas Research Center, which was established with a grant received by the Arkansas Department of Education and does data research for multiple state agencies, looked at the Arkansas Better Chance program’s effect on kindergarten readiness of children.

Using the results of an evaluation given to every kindergartner entering public school, the study showed that a larger percentage of children from low-income families who had attended pre-kindergarten programs met skill standards than their peers who did not attend pre-kindergarten. The skill categories are general knowledge, oral communication, written language, math concepts, work habits and attentive behaviors.

Students who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals were characterized as low-income in the study. A family of four with an income of \$43,568 would qualify for those meals.

In 2012, 70 percent of economically advantaged students with no known pre-kindergarten experience showed satisfactory development on the general-knowledge subtest, according to the center’s research. Only 41 percent of economically disadvantaged students without pre-kindergarten did the same. But for low-income children who attended Arkansas Better Chance programs, 50 percent showed satisfactory development on the general-knowledge subtest, according to the analysis.

Sarah Argue, early-childhood education project director at the Arkansas Research Center, said the center is using the data to help the Division of Childcare and Early Childhood Education identify strengths and areas in need of improvement in the pre-kindergarten program.

The benefits of pre-kindergarten go beyond helping children through school, Argue said.

“We know through national studies that there is a huge economic benefit to pre-K,” she said.

Jody Veit-Edrington, North Little Rock School District coordinator of early-childhood education, said the district started its first Arkansas Better Chance program with 36 children in 1991. Now, with more than 500 children served in 28 pre-kindergarten classes, the district has seen a “marked increase” in the academic readiness of the children because of pre-kindergarten.

“We use kindergarten test data to gauge how our children are doing. In the last couple of years, our children who attended ABC pre-K programs have scored as high or higher than the general kindergarten population,” she said. “We feel that is a great indicator of the success of the program. We are very pleased.”